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DESPAIR

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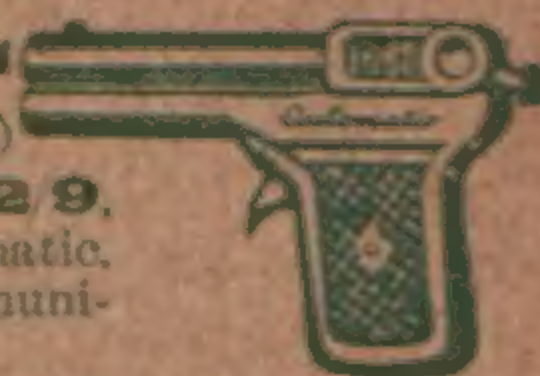
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DUNGEONS OF DESPAIR

CHAPTER 1.

Foresters in Ambush.

It was the end of a blustering March day. A shrewd wind sang among the beeches, filling the forest with such a mighty rustling that a wayfarer might well have thought that it concealed a restless host.

Nor would he have been far wrong, though it would have puzzled him to descry a single figure in that maze of moss-grown trunks.

A sunken and deep-rutted track, intersecting the wood, led to the brow of the hill, then fell away across a sweep of open glade, and, after vanishing for a space in a lower belt of forest, reappeared in the broad valley beyond.

On a spur of the hill overhanging the wagon way and commanding a wide view of the country, stood a giant beech, all red with the glow of the setting sun.

At its base, hidden from the view of anyone approaching from beneath, crouched two men clad in Lincoln green; the one, a bearded fellow of giant proportions and stature, the other, younger by twenty years at least, but evidently a man of position among his fellows.

"Beshrew me, but the wind blows plaguey cold," said the elder of the two, breaking a long spell of silence. "An I lie here much longer, my limbs will become as frozen as icicles, and like to crack off at the first shock of encounter. A murrain seize the old fox for keeping honest men waiting so long in the cold."

"Hold your peace, Little John!" the younger man exclaimed sharply, though never for an instant permitting his eye to wander from the valley spread out to their view beneath. "Voices travel far down the breeze to listening ears, and it would be a sorry ending to our venture if our quarry got wind of our waiting through your peevish grumblings."

The speaker was Robin Hood.

The giant relapsed into sulky silence at this rebuke from his chief, and, fixing his keen eyes on the winding thread which marked the distant highway, fell to chewing the stems of long grass which grew within his reach.

The wind died away with the sinking of the sun, and soon there was scarcely a sound to break the stillness.

Suddenly a pin-point of crimson light flashed from a fringe of grey willows away towards the sunset.

A sigh of relief burst from the lips of Robin Hood.

"At last they come," he whispered to the forester at his side. "See yonder by that belt of osiers at the brook side! Do you not catch the glint of spear-points, Little John, or is it that my eyes have grown dazed with watching?"

The giant dragged himself cautiously to the side

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of his chief, and peering along the arrow which Robin levelled at the mark, watched in silence for a few seconds.

"Ay, of a truth," he grunted at last. "The advance-guard. A score of spears, and they move in haste. Doubtless the fox is eager to win his earth safely with his prey ere a better waylay and rob him," and he gave a chuckle of satisfaction.

"Heaven forbid that they suspect our ambush!" muttered the outlaw prince. "Our task may become a thousand times more difficult. Ha! the sign!"

There had come a strange, whistling sound from over the belt of trees beneath, ending in a smart thud in the branches above their heads.

"Will Scarlet has espied them," Robin Hood exclaimed, looking up and discerning an arrow, tipped with red feathers, which had buried itself deep in the tree-trunk high overhead. "And a second, too. By my halidom! but Will aimed that shaft an ell too low for my liking. Had I raised myself upright, my brain had perceived his signal more quickly than I could have wished."

Another arrow, following close upon the first, had whizzed through the air, and now stuck quivering in the bole of the giant beech, scarcely six feet from the ground. From the feathered butt a tiny slip of parchment was hanging by a silken thread.

"See, it carries a message, Little John. Reach me it down with your bow, and be careful not to show too much of that lumbering carcase of yours in the doing."

The giant, raising his bow cautiously and looping it over the arrow, snapped the shaft off short, and the head came fluttering to the ground.

Eagerly unfolding the note, Robin Hood read the dozen words scrawled upon it:

"The advance-guard draws near. The maid is with the main body a bow-shot in the rear."

Twice Robin read it, and his face darkened. It was evident that the news was not altogether to his liking.

"With the main body," he repeated. "That is ill-luck, but nevertheless we must do the best we can, and trust to good fortune that our plans go not amiss."

Then, picking up his bow, he notched an arrow to the string.

The nature of the plans to which Robin Hood referred can best be explained by harking back two days and a score of miles to a point of the forest at which the King of Sherwood and his men had one of their many secret strongholds.

It was to this retreat—a great cavern, partly the work of nature, but enlarged by the band to their requirements, and impregnable by reason of the impenetrable thickets, through which no intruder could force his way, unless acquainted with the secret paths—that the Saxon outlaws, when the snows had melted, had moved from their winter quarters.

Two important reasons had prompted Robin Hood to this course.

First, he was anxious to be on the march, lest, in the long months of winter, the news of his whereabouts had spread to the ears of his enemies; and secondly, tidings had come to him that, with the melting of the snows, the Norman tyrants were again embarking in expeditions of brutal robbery and murder, and that his aid was sorely needed by the suffering Saxons in the south.

Nor, on the latter score, had he commenced his march an instant too soon.

It was the hour of curfew. The remains of supper had been cleared away, and the great iron stew-pot swung back from the log-fire.

Seated at the foot of a giant tree was Robin Hood, with Maid Marian kneeling prettily at his side, warming her dainty hands in the glow of the leaping flames.

Martha and the rest of the women-folk had retired within the cave, for in spite of the blazing fire the March night wind bit keenly.

Stretched around on the thick carpet of beech mast and dead leaves lay the hardy foresters, blinking sleepily at the towering flames. Time was beginning

to hang heavily on their hands, for the long inactivity of winter had told its tale, and there was not a man there but was weary to be in harness again against the common foe.

"Come, my bully boys," cried Robin Hood, cheerily, breaking an unusually long spell of silence, "off with these gloomy looks. The winter is over, and soon we shall be afoot again in right good earnest, for it is a capful of sequins to an acorn that these Norman dogs find us work to do before many days are out. Ho, Friar Tuck! a song to cheer us, and let it have a rousing chorus, so that we may keep our jaws, at least, from growing rusty."

"Ho, a song from the fighting friar!" echoed a dozen voices. "Where's our good priest? Friar Tuck, a song—a song!"

But the only reply was a prolonged snoring from a dark corner near the cavern's mouth.

"That's the lazy old tub for a crown, I'll warrant," chuckled Little John, picking up a billet of wood and flinging it in the direction of the sleeper. "Rouse out there, jolly friar, and let us hear thee warble."

The piece of wood caught Tuck a smart rap on the hindquarters.

"Ouch!" ejaculated the friar, struggling to a sitting position, "what means this outrage? Can a man of peace not close his eyes in slumber for forty winks without being harassed and beset by a pack of——"

"Peace, good Friar Tuck," interposed Robin Hood. "The breach of courtesy, in the first place, is mine. I did but call upon you for a ditty, and finding you slumbering when the rest of us would be merry, our good friend Little John threw you a pillow, that your sleep might be the sounder."

"The villain! I knew it was some vile handiwork of his," growled the priest.

Then in brighter tones he added:

"But a song you want, and a song you shall have, good Robin, though my throat croaks like a raven and cracks like the big bell of Bolton."

So saying, he sprang to his feet, and, with hands thrust deep into his girdle and his close-cropped bullet head thrown

back, in a powerful voice began to trol forth this lay:

"While there's shaft in the quiver, and string to the bow,
And deer in the forest, a-hunting we'll go.
And if the King's ranger dares question our right,
We'll tie, truss and trounce the presumptuous wight.
For here in the forest, the home of the free,
We own but one master, that's King Liberty."

"Cease for an instant, friend Tuck," cried Robin Hood, suddenly holding up his hand. "If my ears did not deceive me, that was a signal that sounded from the sentinels. Hark! there it is again," he added, as the distant hoot of an owl, delivered with a peculiar turn to the final note, broke upon the stillness.

"Will Scarlet, run forward and see what is amiss, and take a comrade with you, lest there be mischief afoot."

The two foresters slipped off silently, and disappeared in the narrow path cut in the thicket which formed one of the approaches to the camp.

The rest of the band, roused from their drowsy mood by the unexpected signal, sat upright, grasping their weapons.

In a few minutes, however, their minds were set at ease once more by the reappearance of Will Scarlet and his comrade. They were supporting between them a man, whose lagging gait and lolling head showed that he was in the last stages of exhaustion and fatigue.

"This poor fellow seeks you, sir," Will said, as they dragged their burden into the warm circle of the fire and let him sink on a couch of dried ferns. "He stumbled upon our furthestmost outpost, who sent him on to the camp under escort. Who or what he is they know not, for the only words he has uttered is your name—Robin Hood."

At the first sight of the stranger, Marian had risen and run to his side, her kind heart brimming over with womanly pity; and now she knelt beside him, chafing his hands in an effort to restore the life which seemed to have gone out of him.

"Poor lad!" Robin Hood exclaimed softly, as by the light of a brand taken from the fire he examined the face,

which even in the ruddy glare showed white as death. "An ugly gash upon his forehead and burns upon his cheek. More work of these Norman hounds, I'll warrant!"

Under the tender attention of Maid Marian, and by the aid of strong restoratives which the friar—who was something of a leech—was able to apply, the insensible form began gradually to show some signs of returning life.

First there was a flickering of the eyelids, and then a deep-drawn, shuddering sigh broke from the young man's lips.

A mouthful of soup, piping hot from the cauldron, soon roused the stranger to his senses, and at last he dragged himself to a sitting posture and stared about him as if dazed and bewildered by the strange scene which met his eyes.

"Robin Hood! I seek Robin Hood!" he whispered faintly.

"I am Robin Hood. Say on," replied the outlaw prince, stepping into the full firelight.

"Heaven be thanked, for at last I have found you, brave sir! I am Wilfrid, son of Simon Wyke, most foully murdered, brother of Hilda, now in the base clutches of my father's assassin!" gasped the stranger with sudden vigour. "It is Sir Rufus de Gervoise who has done this deed, and I cry out to you, Robin Hood, champion of Saxon rights, to avenge my father's blood and win back my sister from the Norman fiend who has stolen her away!"

The effort had proved too much for the exhausted frame, and the youth collapsed insensible into the arms of the good-natured friar, who laid him gently back upon the couch of fern.

"Ay, see to him, friend Tuck. Remove him to the shelter of the cave, where the women may attend him," Robin Hood exclaimed; and then, clenching his fists and pacing up and down beneath the great beech-tree like a caged lion, he roared:

"Avenge! Ay, by the stars above me, I will wreak a vengeance on this Norman's head that will make the rest of the craven pack tremble at the news! I have had news of this ruffian's doings before, and, by my halidom! he shall render me an account of them ere the

month is out. Little John, see to it that the men are ready to march at sunrise if need be, for I have work in hand for every stout heart that loves liberty and justice."

Those of the foresters who had heard the recital from the young man's own lips were already putting their accoutrements in order, for they instinctively knew that their chief would have but one answer to such an appeal.

Little John, however, moved off to apprise the outposts of the news, and Robin Hood sat himself down to curb his impatience until Wilfrid Wyke should have recovered sufficiently to give the full details of his story.

In an hour the friar came out of the cavern to say that the invalid wished to speak with Robin, and the outlaw prince went in and sat at the couch-side.

The tale that was told to him was in brief this:

Old Simon Wyke had held the farm of Wykenham, near to the castle of Sir Rufus de Gervoise—a Norman baron, whose deeds of cruelty had made his name notorious for many a league round. Now Simon had a daughter, Hilda, a winsome maid, whose charms had prompted the Norman tyrant to demand her hand in marriage.

The sturdy old Saxon refused to comply with that demand in no measured terms, and the result of his defiance was that one fine morning Sir Rufus, with a strong band of men-at-arms, rode over to Wykenham, called Simon out of his house, and then and there, without warning, cruelly murdered him.

Horror-stricken at the sight of this treacherous deed, Wilfrid, who had followed his father into the open to know the cause of the summons, rushed back into the house, swiftly barred the door, and with the aid of a few faithful churls prepared to defend his sister.

But with nothing but oaken planks to withstand the onslaught of the Norman axes, it was impossible to make a prolonged resistance.

The door gave way at last—bolts, hinges, and all—and the cowardly attackers rushed in.

Wilfrid went down with a sword-cut across the head, which stretched him

senseless. The shrieking Hilda was dragged from her chamber and hoisted to Sir Rufus's saddle-bow, the rest of the Saxon defenders were put to the sword, the homestead was set blazing, and the wounded and dead were left to their fate.

Then the Norman butchers wheeled about and galloped back to the castle, laughing over their morning's sport.

Happily for Wilfrid, the sting of falling sparks aroused him to a sense of his danger, and he had scarcely time to drag himself clear of the doomed building before it was alight from lintel to roof-tree.

After that he lay unconscious so close to the fierce flames that the fire had scorched his cheek.

At last, with the cold mists of night, he recovered his senses, though not his reason, and set out, like one in a dream, wandering he knew not where.

Bit by bit he learned his sister's fate from the less timid hearts around that dared to give him food and shelter. Then he heard of Robin Hood, and the rumour came that the outlaw prince was lying somewhere within the forest not many leagues away, and he set out, ill and shaken with fever, to find him and seek his aid.

When the last detail of this gruesome recital had been told, Robin Hood sank back and pondered in deep thought. For several minutes he sat with knitted brows and gleaming eyes, staring straight at the cavern wall before him.

"I know this castle of De Gervoise," he said, at last. "It is of poor defence, and scarce calculated to withstand a resolute siege."

"That has been said of it by men of soldierly training, I know," agreed Wilfrid.

"But there is another castle in that country, held by Sir Brian de Beauvrage, is there not?"

"Ay, a staunch enough place, built on an island in a marshy mere."

"And this Beauvrage is a kinsman of Sir Rufus, if I mistake not?"

"I know not that, but they are boon friends, nevertheless."

"Good! Then I have a plan. Send Little John and Will Scarlet to me, Friar Tuck; and if our patient's

strength will bear it we will devise such a plan as shall set the fair Hilda free before three suns have set."

Together the five men sat talking earnestly far into the night.

"It is settled, then," said Robin Hood at last. "You, Will Scarlet, with Lightfoot, will set out disguised for Wykenham at sunrise, and will spread the news that Robin Hood is coming hot-foot with all his men to storm De Gervoise Castle and rescue the maid."

"Spread the report boldly so that Sir Rufus must hear it, and if I know aught of his craven spirit we shall draw the fox from his earth and send him slinking to a safer place with his booty."

"Then is our time to catch him in his flight. I will follow with the main body at noon. Meet me at our rendezvous at night, and report all that you have ascertained."

"And now, good comrades, the moon stoops low, and you must take the road at dawn. Good-night!"

* * * * *

Thus it is that we find Robin Hood and Little John in ambush at the forest-edge above Wykenham, on the road between De Gervoise Castle and the stronghold of Beauvrage.

The rumour of Robin Hood's rapid march, cunningly spread, had fallen on fruitful ground; and such was the outlaw's renown that Sir Rufus, being no braver than the rest of his fellows, was thrown into a panic.

After a hasty inspection of the defences of his castle—which was really more in the nature of a fortified dwelling than a stronghold—he decided that it would not suffice to withstand the onslaught of so redoubtable a warrior as Robin Hood; and so, after a few hurried preparations, he gathered his men-at-arms about him, and, with his fair captive, set out for the stronghold of his kinsman.

The glitter of the spear-points of his advance-guard, and the arrows of Will Scarlet, proved that the ambush was on the alert.

The attack, Robin Hood had decreed, should not take place until the whole force was enveloped, he himself choosing a position from which he could best control the moment of striking.

It was his plan with his own detachment to deal first with the advance-guard, with whom, he had reason to suppose, Sir Rufus and Hilda would be riding, and then from the higher ground to swoop down to the assistance of Will Scarlet, whose duty it was to cut off and surround the supporting body of horsemen, if such there should prove to be.

"The maid is with the rearguard," he said again, turning to the parchment slip which had sped to him on Will Scarlet's arrow. "By Heaven, that is unfortunate, Little John! But we must do the best we can. There is naught for it but to let Sir Rufus's spears draw abreast of this point so that we wing them not until the whole quarry is well within the net."

"Then, by Heaven, we must deal with them short and sharp, and hurry to Will Scarlet's aid, for there the fight will be thickest."

Cautiously raising himself above the bramble thicket, Robin Hood gave a shrill whistle like the harsh call of a startled blackbird, and as if by magic fifty heads, each wearing a cap of Lincoln green, popped up from various hiding-places among the bracken and turned towards him.

Their chief made a sign, then pointed to a spot in the track beneath him, and instantly dropped flat upon his face beside his companion.

For at that moment his quick ear had caught the jingle of armour and the thud of horses' hoofs in the belt of trees below.

CHAPTER 2.

The Fight in the Wood.

ON came the Norman horsemen—a dozen men-at-arms, each with lance poised on the point of the mailed boot, and sword clanking on the massive saddle.

Right and left they cast swift, nervous glances, for they knew of Robin Hood's coming, and here, of all places, he might be expected most to make his attack.

Once clear of the belt of trees, however, and the open upland gained, they seemed to breathe afresh, and clapping spurs to their horses they dashed forward with evident signs of relief.

Not a twig stirred, and the green-caps among the bracken were as motionless as stones.

Thrown off their guard by the complete stillness of the forest, for the wind had now died down to a whisper, the Norman spearmen pressed on.

Suddenly a faint whistling sound, gradually increasing, fell on Robin Hood's ears, and again a red-tipped arrow clattered into the branches overhead and came tumbling down beside him.

The net had been drawn close, and the quarry encircled.

The flight of the arrow and the noise as it glanced among the branches of the great beech-tree had not fallen unheeded on the trained ears of the spearmen, and at the sound they involuntarily drew rein, and in so doing fell into confusion.

Robin Hood was quick to take advantage of this, and springing to his feet, with Little John beside him, they both drew their bows full stretch, and two arrows went whizzing into the huddled ranks of the advance guard.

Before the stricken men could reel in their saddles, and their comrades realise that they were attacked, fifty lads in Lincoln green leapt from their hiding-places and poured in a flight of cloth-yard shafts.

Horses and men went down in confusion, and the one or two that remained in their saddles, demoralised and terror-stricken at the swiftness of the blow, wheeled right and left and dashed at full gallop down the road towards the main body.

"Forward, for your lives!" shouted Robin Hood, springing like a deer down the slope in the direction of the wood beneath, from which the sounds of the conflict were already echoing.

"Sweet liberty or death!" roared Little John, crashing his way through bush and brake, while the battle-cry was caught up left and right by the foresters as they rushed to the rescue.

Within the wood the fight was being waged with the utmost fury, for the Normans, realising that they were completely hemmed in, were fighting with all the ferocity of despair.

A dozen floundering chargers, some with their mail clad riders pinned beneath, marked the terrible effect of the first flight of arrows. But already the fallen Normans had not gone unavenged, for Robin Hood, as he ran, almost stumbled over the bodies of two of his own trusty followers.

"Stick close to me, Little John. We shall need all our strength to bring the murderer to bay and rescue the maid," the chief cried, as sword in hand he dashed forward to that point at which the press was thickest, and where, by the fluttering banneret which swayed and toppled overhead like a gaudy lily in a breeze, he knew he would find the leader of the foe.

"A rescue! A rescue! Death to the Normans!"

The battle-shout sent renewed life into the Saxon ranks, for at close quarters their Lincoln doublets were offering but poor protection to the Norman steel. But as their two most redoubtable champions forced their way to the front, the foresters rallied in and surged forward with redoubled vigour.

It must be said for Sir Rufus that, craven though he may have been when his blood was unstirred by passion, in the heat of battle he was fighting like a lion.

Robin was quick to single him out, for he stood in the forefront erect in his stirrups, his gilded armour tinged blood-red with a stray shaft from the setting sun, his mailed left arm encircling the captive Hilda, hanging fainting across his saddle-peak, his right hand wielding a spiked mace with deadly effect.

"Yield thee, Sir Rufus!" shouted the outlaw, springing forward with uplifted sword. "Lay down your arms, and your men shall be spared!"

"Dog of a Saxon, die!" snarled the Norman; then, driving his spurs deep into the reeking flanks of his charger, he forced the animal almost on top of Robin Hood.

The frenzied bound of the horse caught the outlaw off his guard, and though by an agile twist he avoided the ponderous hoofs, there was little doubt

that the descending mace would have finally ended his career had not Little John intercepted the blow with his own sword.

As it was, the steel was snapped off short at the hilt, and the giant's sinewy arm dropped limp and helpless to his side, paralysed by the terrific shock. Then both he and his chief were hurled headlong by the rush of the Norman knight.

Seeing their champions fall, the foresters gave way for an instant, horror-stricken at the sight.

Quick to take advantage of the discomfiture of their assailants, the horsemen charged forward with shouts of victory, and in another minute, with the elated Rufus at their head, were thundering down the glade by the road they had come.

While some of the foresters unslung their bows and sent a score of arrows whistling after the fugitives, the rest ran to the assistance of their chief.

Robin Hood, however, sprang to his feet unhurt, save for a sad bruising. The giant also raised himself heavily, for by reason of his bulk he had fared worse.

Mad rage and blank despair were written in the faces of both, and neither spoke, though Robin Hood clasped the other's hand with a grip of gratitude.

For a space the yeomen stood silent and despondent. A score of green-clad figures were dotted about prostrate among the brown bracken, and six of these lay still in death.

Of the enemy twenty were stiff and stark, suffocated out of their misery, doubtless, by the weight of the armour they bore. Two of the Normans only were still alive.

And the ambush had failed. Sir Rufus had escaped with his fair captive, and the struggle must begin all over again.

But Robin Hood was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet. Scarcely had the clatter of the retreating horsemen died away when four of the foresters had been chosen and dispatched upon the trail, mounted upon captured Norman chargers.

With the castle of De Gervoise but four miles distant, and the stronghold of Sir Brian de Beauvrage within a league, Robin Hood knew that immediate pursuit would be futile. All he wished to gain was information as to which of the castles Sir Rufus had headed his flight.

Friar Tuck, who throughout the fight had rendered invaluable aid with his iron-shod quarter-staff, had now laid aside his weapon and set about the tending of the wounded and the burying of the dead.

Under the spreading beeches a great grave was scooped out of the soft forest mould, and in it were laid Saxon and Norman, side by side.

Then the yeoman band gathered round bareheaded, and as the last light of evening died away the friar reverently recited a prayer for the departed souls.

Then the homeward march began. Scarcely a word was spoken, for all were sick at heart and weary under their burden of captured armour and wounded men.

But the rendezvous was reached at last, and in the cheery glow of the camp-fire and the appetising odour which soon came wafting from the great cooking-pot, the spirits of the band revived, and the plan of the future campaign was eagerly discussed.

"As long as the maid is in the hands of the Norman tyrant, so long must we struggle until we effect her rescue," Robin Hood declared, and his words were met with shouts of approval.

"If it should chance that Sir Rufus has taken refuge with De Beauvrage, the puzzle is, how are we to storm a castle that is surrounded by water?" Little John said; "for, save Friar Tuck here, who has too much blubber on his bones ever to permit his carcass sinking, the rest of us stand a good chance of drowning ere we so much as lay a hand on the castle walls."

"Blubber! Hark to the saucy varlet," snorted the irate priest, rolling over and glaring at the reclining giant. "I would have you know that mine is not fat, but brawny muscle and—"

His voice was lost, however, in the

howls of merriment that greeted this statement.

"I'faith, then, Sir Priest," said Will Scarlet, throwing off the gloom which had darkened his spirits since the skirmish, "yours must, indeed, be the strongest stomach in the company."

"Ay, that it is, and a stronger one than that lumbering leviathan's over there, who turned so faint from fear this evening that when a horse did but wag its tail at him he fell flat on his back with fright."

This malicious dig at the giant's downfall before Sir Rufus's sudden onslaught brought Little John to his feet in an instant.

"That lie in your teeth, old shaven pate!" he roared, glaring at the unperturbed friar, who sat coolly toasting his sandalled toes in the warmth of the glowing embers. "True, I was struck to earth, but I am not ashamed of that, for it was a brave blow, swung in fair fight, and it shivered the steel in my hand to flinders. Lucky for you, fat priest, that it was my sword and not your puny cudgel that warded off the stroke, or we should now possess a man of peace without a head—not that it has ever been much use to you."

"A truce to these pleasantries, good comrades," Robin Hood interposed, at last. "It is to Little John here that I owe my life to-night, for had he not parried the Norman's stroke I should not now be here. As for our jolly friar, I have no doubt that he used his quarter-staff to some effect during the fray, for more than once I caught the flutter of his frock on the outskirts of the skirmish."

"Ay, on the outskirts," growled Little John meaningly. "Trust him not to bring himself too close to the centre of the fight."

"Well, well, let it be so an' it please you, Sir Lout," assented the friar, good-humouredly. "As a man of peace, my part in to-day's unfortunate affair was a small one, but spying a man in the press carrying a piece of rare embroidery which my eye, alas! coveted, I could not refrain from asking him for it, and when he refused, an evil spirit prompted me to take it from him."

Alack-a-day! for the peace of my soul, my puny efforts succeeded, and now for this square of gaudy tinsel I might be branded as a common thief."

At this point Friar Tuck, after wiping away an imaginary tear from his eye, produced from the bosom of his ample frock the emblazoned banner of Sir Rufus de Gervoise.

The company were all so amazed, for they had imagined that the standard-bearer had escaped with his master, that they were dumb for a moment, and then a great shout of applause rent the air.

"Bravely done, my bully boy," said Little John, as pleased as the rest, striding across the fire. "Cry truce, and give me thy hand upon it."

"Nay, I am moved to cry 'No truce,' if only to save my delicate fingers from being mauled in your great paw, good Little John. I know your grip, and, by your leave, I'll count my hand as shaken."

At this instant the return of the four yeomen who had followed on the track of the fugitive Normans put an end to the merriment.

"What of Sir Rufus, my good fellows?" Robin Hood answered eagerly.

"He is at the castle of Sir Brian de Beauvrage. There we heard him clatter across the drawbridge in the dark. As a sign that his hiding-place is not unknown to Robin Hood, Wat Fletcher here notched an arrow and sent it whistling through the windows of the great hall."

"Ah! you bring the worst news. But at any rate we have tracked the sly fox to his earth, and nothing remains but for us to dig him out. There is one consolation for us—that we shall exterminate two of the vermin with one blow, for this Sir Brian, his kinsman, has even a fouler record than Sir Rufus, and his brutalities have often so set my blood boiling that I have vowed I would one day burn his castle about his ears. The hour for the fulfilment of that vow has come. But first, we must add to our forces, and a messenger must ride forth this very night."

At a call for volunteers from among

the lightest horsemen of the band, a dozen men stepped forth, and of these the one named Lightfoot was chosen.

Within an hour he was ready in the saddle, and Robin Hood was giving his instructions. After instructing him how to bring reinforcements, the outlaw prince added:

"To Wilfrid Wyke, carry my greeting, and tell him that his sister Hilda is safe, though still in the hands of his father's murderer. Tell him, too, that if his hurts are healed I shall be glad to have him here at my side. God speed you and grant you a safe journey."

A last handgrip, and Lightfoot struck spurs into his horse and vanished amid the trackless forest.

"And now, my lads, at cock-crow tomorrow our work begins," said Robin Hood, returning to the cheery circle of the fire.

CHAPTER 3.

An Unwelcome Guest.—The Sign of the Arrow.

THE sentinels on the battlements of Sedgemere Castle, the island stronghold of Sir Brian de Beauvrage, were pacing to and fro, for there was a bite of frost in the air, and it was as much as they could do to keep the blood stirring in their limbs.

A hundred feet below, the black waters of the mere lapped restlessly against the weed-grown walls, whispering a lullaby to three score wretched captives immured in dark, evil-smelling dungeons, deeper down even than the waters themselves.

Beyond the moat was a gloomy stretch of waving reed springing from spongy, treacherous moss, and further back, hidden in the gloom of night, the margin of the lake, crowned with woods, now starved and shrivelled under the touch of winter. Between the land and the castle a stone causeway ran, reached from the gate by means of the great drawbridge, which, as curfew had tolled an hour since, was now raised.

The warm red glow from the windows of the castle hall formed a cheery con-

trast to the gloom without, and there was many a grumble from the half-frozen sentinels on the ramparts at the ill-luck which sent them to the battlements when their more fortunate comrades were eating and drinking at the well-stocked tables.

For the evening meal was going forward, and, to judge by the bursts of uproarious merriment which every now and again echoed from the hall, the feast was a right royal one.

At the head of the upper table was Sir Brian de Beauvrage, a tall, stout man, with coarse, florid features half-hidden in a stubbly, reddish beard.

It was a cruel, vicious face, bloated with hard living, and scored with the tell-tale lines which betrayed the relentless, brutal nature for which his name was notorious throughout the countryside.

He was named by the wretched Saxons who fell beneath his power as the bitterest master, the most merciless creditor and persucutor, in that quarter of England—save, perhaps, Sir Rufus de Gervoise.

To De Beauvrage a man's life was only more valuable than that of the scurviest mongrel that fed beneath his tables, in that every butchered Saxon added yet another degree of terror to the notoriety in which he revelled.

Not that he always slew his enemies.

Deep down beneath the castle the solid rock was honeycombed with cells, which were known as the Dungeons of Despair. In these evil holes such of his victims who had fallen under his displeasure, without meriting a more sudden and merciful end, lay doomed to a living death.

On the baron's right at the banqueting table lounged a foppish young fellow, whose neat black doublet, set out with silver, and elaborately jewelled baldric and dagger, contrasted strangely with the ill-kept and greasy finery of his host.

"By my faith, Sir Denis, but these Saxon dogs die hard," the baron added with a laugh, after relating the story of his cruel attacks upon some peaceful Saxon homesteads. "Even the little whelps fought like fiends."

"You say right, Sir Brian," replied the foppish-looking young Norman. "These Saxons die hard—so hard, in truth, that I doubt me that there will be many of us who will feel Saxon steel between our shoulder-blades before Normans may doff mail with safety."

A flush stole over the baron's face, and he glared uneasily at the keen, calm face beside him.

"You take a gloomy view of life, my friend," he said at last, with a forced laugh. He had heard that threat before from Saxon lips, but it jarred upon him to hear one of his own race voicing the sentiment.

A Saxon knife between his shoulder-blades! The thought brought a clammy sweat to his brow.

And at that instant a shout echoed from the battlements without, and then came the creaking of the drawbridge as it was lowered.

"Who dares to open my castle gates at this hour of night without my authority?" shouted the baron, springing to his feet and glaring at the startled retainers who filled the lower tables.

"Go tell the guard to admit no one, or by my halidom they shall hang head downwards from the gate to-morrow!" he roared, beside himself with blind fury.

But already the thunder of hoofs could be heard as horsemen passed over the bridge, and then a clattering and shouting in the castle yard.

At last the door was flung open, and a figure in battered armour appeared in the hall, making his way unsteadily to the head of the table.

"Sir Rufus, by all that breathes!" cried the baron, flinging himself back into his chair and giving vent to his feelings of relief in a peal of raucous laughter. "And in sorry plight, too! Why, kinsman, your armour is as battered as a tinker's kettle. And what's this? A wench, by all that's holy!"

The sight of the fainting form of Hilda carried in the arms of a stalwart soldier, who followed close behind his master, only moved the baron to further merriment.

"Ha, ha, Sir Rufus! You were ever susceptible to the charms of the fair

sex, but this latest beauty seems to have cost you some hard knocks, to judge by your harness."

"A truce to this banter, Sir Brian," said the knight sullenly, turning a savage scowl upon the grinning company at the lower tables. "Give me meat and drink, and leave to place this vixen in the charge of your womenfolk, and you shall have my story. Meantime, I warn you to double your sentinels and keep your gates treble-barred, for Sedgemere Castle is beset."

"Beset! By whom?"

"By one whose strength I hold in such high estimation that when I heard of his approach I abandoned my own castle, which at the best is ill-befitted to stand siege, and came hither. Even then I did not escape. Only an hour ago, when riding through the outskirts of the forest with my men-at-arms, we were surrounded and attacked by at least a hundred Saxon dogs, who emptied a dozen of my saddles at their first flight of arrows. It was with the greatest difficulty that I forced my way through with a handful of my men and escaped. Four of the varlets followed hard upon our tracks and are now without the gates."

Sir Brian de Beauvrage let out an angry growl.

"By the bones of the Conqueror!" he exclaimed, thumping the table with his fist, "but you are likely to prove a right welcome guest, Sir Rufus! First you pick your quarrel with a pack of Saxon scullions over a low-born maid, and then because you fear to face them in your own castle you must needs run to mine, and bring the whole rabble down about my gates. Who is this champion among swineherds whose very name chills the blood in your veins and sets you running ere a blow is struck?"

Sir Rufus leapt to his feet, trembling with passion at the insulting words.

The two men stood facing each other for an instant like wild beasts about to spring, and then a strange thing happened.

There was a crash and splintering of wood from the windows above, a whizzing sound, and there, sticking upright in an oaken panel, was an arrow.

The whole company stood gazing at

the strange spectacle as if under some horrible spell.

Then the languid, drawling tones of the young Norman whom De Beauvrage had previously addressed as Sir Denis broke the silence.

"Methinks, Sir Brian, this messenger has brought the answer to your question. For yonder shaft is brother to the one which tore my best shirt of Milanese mail in a little *mêlée* in Sherwood Forest with the freebooter, Robin Hood. If I am not too hasty in my conclusions, it is the bold outlaw himself who is without the gates of Sedgemere Castle, and this is his peculiar way of announcing his presence."

"Robin Hood!" gasped the baron, his flabby cheeks paling with fear, for the thought of the Saxon blade of vengeance again flashed through his brain.

The name was echoed by a hundred pairs of lips. Through the courtyard, along the battlements, down to the scullions at the turnspits in the kitchens, the news ran like wildfire.

Even the echo of it reached the Dungeons of Despair in the live rock beneath, and set many a crushed heart beating again wildly with hope.

In an hour the whole castle was pulsing with life, and the corridors rang with the clang of mail and clatter of accoutrements.

Cross-bows, pikes, axes, crowbars, and implements of all descriptions for offence and defence were dragged out from the armoury and issued to the defenders, who carried them to the battlements.

Far into the night the turmoil went on, but in the grey light of dawn, when the shock of the panic had died away, men began to chaff at the danger; and as at last the sun shone through the mist and revealed the banks of the lake without a single living being in sight, the spirits of the Norman garrison began to rise.

Some even expressed the belief that the outlaw prince had withdrawn his forces and relinquished his quest.

From a window high up in a turret of the keep one pair of anxious eyes looked forth.

It was to this chamber that the fair Hilda had been carried on the previous

night, and there left in the custody of an old woman.

The maid had sunk at once into the deep slumber of exhaustion; but with the daylight she awakened and took her stand at the narrow window which looked out upon the lake.

The unusual activity in the courtyard below and the sight of the preparations for defence on the battlements were not lost upon her, and a light of hope shone in her eyes which the old hag was quick to notice.

"Look to the east, my pretty one," chuckled the old woman who guarded her, giving a shrill cackle of laughter as she spoke. "Look to the east, for there the storm-clouds gather which will burst in drops of warm, red blood. Ha, ha! the day is come when the sins of these old stones are to be purged with fire and the race of tyrants stamped out. Praise be that I am spared to witness the havoc of the vengeance which I swore would come!"

"What mean you, my good woman?" Hilda gasped, shrinking away, for there was a light of madness in the bleary old eyes.

"I mean that the Saxons are gathering in the forest, and that the day of reckoning for Sir Brian de Beauvrage is here! See, there he moves upon the battlements, with the skulking fox De Gervoise at his side. Ha, ha! Their armour will avail them nothing when vengeance tips the shaft. My curse upon their heads for all the misery they have wrought on me and mine!"

The sight of her persecutor and murderer of all she held dear—for she had no knowledge of her brother's escape—drove Hilda back to the centre of the room, and all the hope in her heart ebbed away.

But the old hag still clung to the window, breaking every now and then into shrill screeches of exultation, which made the girl shudder.

Nevertheless, hope gradually began to creep back to her bosom. She felt that help was at hand, and she prayed that the Saxons would succeed.

All day long the tramp of heavy footsteps sounded in the flagged corridors without; but except her gaoler no one came to disturb her.

There was too much work on hand for the Norman knights—who had sunk their quarrel in face of the common danger which threatened them all—to bestow more than a passing thought upon her.

True, Sir Denis, as he lounged upon the castle walls, watching the preparations for the defence with as much indifference as if they had been for a festival, cast more than one inquiring glance towards the turret-chamber in which he discovered Sir Rufus's fair charmer was lodged; but these were prompted by a feeling of pity, strangely foreign to a Norman heart.

Truth to tell, Sir Denis, who had but lately returned from the Crusades in Palestine, had little liking for Sedge-mere Castle and his host; but then he had less fancy for the court of Prince John, and chance having brought him a week ago as a guest to the board of the Baron de Beauvrage, he had delayed his departure from day to day with characteristic laziness.

Now that the castle was threatened with a siege, he, like a true soldier of fortune, had placed his sword at his host's disposal, and was idling the hours away waiting for the struggle to begin.

Loth as he might have been to admit it, the picture of the fair face framed in the long tresses of yellow hair, as he had seen it on the previous night, rose more than once before his eyes, and the resolve grew stronger within him that she should go unscathed if his arm could save her.

With this new purpose in his heart he sought the staircase leading to the turret chamber, and mounted it with a spring in his step which seemed strange after the leisurely movements which had earned for him the nickname "The Sluggard" among the rough old warriors in the guard-room.

Gaining the corridor, Sir Denis proceeded cautiously, being anxious to avoid meeting his host or Sir Rufus at this moment.

The old hag, hearing his footsteps in the corridor, set up a screeching laugh, and flung the door of Hilda's chamber open with a mocking courtesy.

"Behold the cage, Sir Knight, but beware of the falcons which gather in

the forest, lest they rob you too soon of the dove!" she cackled.

"Out of my path, old beldam, lest I shake your old bones out of your skin!" said Sir Denis with disgust.

The hag hobbled off with a defiant chuckle, and the young knight stepped into the chamber and doffed his velvet cap with a courtly flourish to Hilda, who stood shrinking against the wall, her blue eyes wide with terror.

"Fear no harm from me, fair lady," he reassured her. "I bear no message from Sir Rufus. I had a thought that all this din of preparation might have alarmed you, and came to bid you take comfort, for, if I mistake not, it is your friends who prepare to attack us."

"I am a Saxon, and if your foes are Saxons they may be my friends," Hilda said coldly.

"They are indeed your friends, for we have proof of it. But I have not come to taunt you. The castle walls are thick, and my sword with the rest will be wielded in their defence; but if your friends are my enemies, I pray you number me also as a friend. I have heard the story of your father's death, and know the reason of your presence here. Trust to me, fair lady, that no harm shall come to you, so long as I can strike a blow in your defence."

The courtly manner and kindly tone of the young knight so bewildered Hilda after the coarse usage to which she had always been subjected by those of Norman blood that she could only look at him in amazement.

Then, as the knowledge that in the midst of her persecutors she had one staunch champion crept upon her, she flung herself at Sir Denis's feet with a cry of gratitude.

"Thank Heaven! Thank Heaven for those good words, Sir Knight! and may you be rewarded for that promise."

"Nay, kneel not to me, fair one," said the young Norman gently, somewhat embarrassed at the girl's outburst of gratitude. "After all, I do but observe my knightly vows to defend all maidens in distress. Come, take heart and trust in me, and if your friends without are unsuccessful in their efforts to aid you, then will I vow to save you from Sir Rufus's clutches."

At that instant the door was flung open, and Sir Rufus de Gervoise himself strode into the chamber.

"By my hailidom! but I fear that I am intruding," he said with a sneer, pausing to regard the scene before him.

"I will not deny, Sir Rufus, that your presence at this moment is not entirely welcome," drawled Sir Denis with absolute composure.

"Welcome!" cried the knight, a harsh laugh upon his lips and a scowl as black as thunder on his brow. "By the thunders of Jove! but you have a merry wit, young coxcomb. I come to make my devoirs to a wench who has cost me a castle, a standard, and half a score of good men, and I find her on her knees to a fop in black and silver. Welcome! In sooth, I should fancy not. Out of my path, whelp, lest I draw my dagger across your throat!"

Beside himself with rage, the Norman sprang forward and made as if to seize the trembling girl, but Sir Denis thrust himself between.

The steely glitter in the young man's eyes made Sir Rufus pause.

Neither spoke a word, but faced each other like wild beasts.

Then Sir Rufus, now trembling with passion, sprang at his opponent, a drawn dagger uplifted in his hand.

The steel flashed in its descent, but the young knight jumped nimbly aside, at the same time seizing the wrist in a vice-like grip that made Sir Rufus writhe with pain.

Backward, step by step, Sir Denis forced his antagonist, until he pinned him against the wall; then, with a sudden twist, he sent the dagger clashing to the floor.

One stamp of the foot, and the blade was snapped in two; then the young knight released his terrible grip and turned contemptuously on his heel.

"By the plains of Palestine, but you have wrought your own death!" choked Sir Rufus, so overcome with rage that he leant against the wall for sheer support.

Sir Denis swung round.

"Dastard!" he hissed between clenched teeth. "You talk to me of death. Look to yourself, butcher of

men and harrier of homes, for vengeance is even now hovering round these walls, waiting to strike. Were it not that both our swords may be required before sunset I would slay you where you stand and rob vengeance of its right. Out of my sight, worker of cruelties which shame every true Norman, or I may yet repent me of my word!"

The baffled knight clutched at his sword-hilt, as if to draw it, but the steely glitter of his opponent's eyes sent his hand nerveless to his side again; then, with an angry snarl, he flung himself out of the room.

Sir Denis followed, first doffing his cap courteously to the fair Hilda, who had sought the shelter of the window recess during the quarrel.

Locking the door, and calling out a few strict injunctions to the old hag, who was trembling with terror in the corridor without, he strolled off leisurely, humming an old chant of the Crusaders.

Sir Rufus had disappeared when the younger man reached the courtyard below, but this was as he expected.

Beckoning to his squire, who was awaiting him, Sir Denis next made his way to his own chamber, to arm himself against the foes without and assassins within.

For he knew enough of his enemy to be certain that the blow of vengeance would follow quickly on the quarrel, and would be struck most probably in the dark.

CHAPTER 4.

Friar Tuck Finds a Brother. — The Secret of Sedgemere.

MEANTIME, Robin Hood's preparations for the attack on Sedgemere Castle had gone briskly forward, and already the main force of the foresters was on its way, under the command of their chief.

Will Scarlet, in charge of a small body of men, had been sent forward to picket the tracks which led to the castle, lest the Normans should attempt to forage for additional stores before the net was drawn close.

Little John, with Friar Tuck and a

handful of men, remained at the rendezvous to await the reinforcements hourly expected, and to make preparations for victualling so large a force.

Not that much difficulty was to be feared in that direction, for the country-folk, as soon as they were aware of Robin Hood's presence in their midst, hastened in with offerings of such simple fare as they could afford, while so long as the foresters had bows they had no need to want for good venison and game.

Friar Tuck was in excellent humour with himself, for he was never so happy as when attending to the provisioning of the band.

Yet there was a frown upon his broad face when he was returning to the camp, dragging by the reins an old horse harnessed to a rickety cart, on which wobbled a couple of meagre sacks of flour.

"Beshrew me! but if this is a sample of the wealth of this country-side in the matter of wherewithal to make good bread, then we are like to die of hunger before the week is out. Gallop, my noble steed! Trot, walk, do anything, so long as we get to camp with our merchandise!"

Friar Tuck was returning from a foray which he had undertaken on his own account, and the ancient pony, the wagon, and the two sacks of flour were the outcome of much haggling between himself and the owner of a mill two miles off.

Had the good friar been possessed of a purse, the bargain would not have taken long to conclude, but as he had not so much as a groat about his person, it took all his powers of persuasion, backed by an unpriestlike exhibition of quarter-staff play, to induce the miller to part with his goods on credit.

Having got his booty so far on the way, it looked as if the jolly friar would have to abandon it or shoulder the sacks himself, for the cart had at last stuck in a rut, from which neither the starved horse nor his own broad shoulders could extricate it.

It was during a brief rest from his efforts that he heard a movement in the bushes behind him, and swinging

round, saw a brother of the cloth standing amazed at the spectacle.

"Pax vobiscum," said Friar Tuck, as unperturbed as if they were meeting in the cloister of a monastery.

The brother of the cloth returned the salutation.

"Comforts for the sick, an I am not mistaken, brother?" queried the newcomer, in an innocent voice.

"Ay, for some who are in sore need of nourishment. If you would help me in my errand of mercy, I pray you lend me your aid in hoisting this wagon from the slough into which it has fallen."

"Right willingly, brother, if it be to save human life."

Friar Tuck flashed a keen glance at the figure before him, for there was a ring of sarcasm in the voice, which made him feel a trifle uncomfortable. But the stranger was a little bullet-headed, round man, somewhat after his own stamp, though scarcely more than half his bulk.

There was a merry twinkle in his bead-like eyes, too, that quite disarmed suspicion.

Without more ado, Friar Tuck and the stranger priest set themselves to the task of lifting the wagon from the rut, and so well did they work that the wheels were quickly set upon firm ground where there was little danger of a recurrence of the trouble.

"'Tis well and truly done," announced the strange friar. "And more, my brother, after such exertion 'twere meet that you should refresh the inner man. My humble cell is but a stone's-throw from this track, and if you will share the modest fare which it is my privilege to be able to set before you, I shall be honoured."

Nothing loth, Friar Tuck, leaving his steed to pick a dainty meal among the lush herbage, followed close upon the heels of his new-found friend, and soon found himself in a small clearing in the forest, at one end of which was a rude stone building, set against a bank into which, as he could see, the hermit's cell burrowed.

The little friar flung wide the door of the hermitage and admitted Tuck to a

rock-walled chamber, of the sort in which many of the poorer brethren of the Church at that time passed lives of self-denial, away from the clamour and temptation of the world.

Excepting a wooden slab which served as a table, and two rough stools, the cell was bare.

In one corner a heap of spruce boughs and dead leaves provided the good man's bed, while above it yawned a deep recess cut in the rock, which Friar Tuck had a shrewd suspicion comprised the larder and buttery of the establishment.

"A right snug corner on a winter's night, I'll warrant," he said, sinking on to a stool and stirring the embers of the wood fire. "With a blazing log on the hearth and a dish to dip one's fist into, it would be a palace fit for a king."

"Ay, snug enough, though the fare which my poor cupboard holds is scarcely kingly," laughed the little friar, diligently raking about in the recess. "See, I have but a platter of dry beans to set before you—though, in truth, they be excellent fare when washed down with a draught of the sparkling water which I shall presently bring."

Tuck's jaws fell, for a dish of dried beans promised but poor entertainment.

But remembering that as a friar beans should not come amiss to him, he stammered:

"Ay, excellent food, brother, and I could wish for no better, but——"

And he paused, pulling a wry face.

"But—what?" queried the brother, with his head on one side, and a bird-like twinkle of his eyes.

"But—but—— By St. Dunstan, but me no buts!" Friar Tuck cried, bringing down his huge fist with such a crash on the table that the platter of beans bounced off on to the floor. "See, our first dish is licked clean; so now, brother, on with the second. I'll wager that the rotundity of your person betokens more liberal fare than pottage. Let us share of the best, and I promise you that if ever you pass a night at my humble cell you shall eat and drink of the best in Nottinghamshire."

As he finished speaking Friar Tuck strode across to the recess, picking up the little man when the latter strove to hold him back and lifting him gently to one side.

"Ha, ha!" he roared, as he delved among the treasures the hole contained. "What is this instrument of the hunt that I find in a hermit's cell?"

It was a small cross-bow of excellent workmanship that he waved before the eyes of his host, who could only regard him ruefully.

"A cross-bow, by all the saints! and one that has brought many a king's deer to the pot, I'll warrant. Ha, ha! you sly knave—shame on you! Yet will I forgive you an I find some of the venison that it has killed. Hallo, a pasty!"—producing a monster meat-pie, which he deposited on the table with a flourish. "What did I tell you? And, see, a jack of wine! Faith, we are to make a merry meal—for which, good brother, I alone am to be thanked. For whereas you could only find a platter of beans, behold I have conjured from the same cupboard a dinner fit for Richard himself!"

This jest of his own making sent Friar Tuck into such a fit of laughter that all the little man's qualms of conscience and fears of exposure were thrown to the winds, and in a twinkling the two were laughing till the tears ran, and vowing that they were two of the merriest dogs alive.

Then they set to with gusto, and in a short time the whole pasty and the jack of wine were consumed.

"A better meal never graced the tables of Sedgemere Castle, I'll vow!" said Tuck, leaning back and heaving a sigh, which caused him to swell momentarily like a small balloon.

Truth to tell, the memory of Robin Hood's undertaking had only just flashed upon him, and he wished to find out if his merry brother knew anything of Sir Brian's stronghold.

"Ah! that abode of sin and den of wickedness!" sighed Friar Anthony—for such Friar Tuck found to be his name. "Yet, from what you say, you have been within the walls."

"Nay, nay, though I have it in my

mind to pay it a visit shortly," answered Tuck guardedly. "A certain maid I wot of has been carried off by Sir Rufus de Gervoise—"

"Alas! she is in bad hands. I know him well," Anthony murmured.

"For some reason or other he has taken her to Sedgemere Castle, and it is with the hope of gaining admittance to her and offering her spiritual comfort that I bend my steps thither."

"Then, brother, most assuredly you will fail," said Friar Anthony firmly. "I know something of this Baron of Sedgemere, and I know that if the girl is a prisoner, neither friend nor friar will be permitted to speak to her. And if she defies him or his kinsman, Sir Rufus, there are the Dungeons of Despair to swallow her up and entomb her alive. Ah, yes! that has been the fate of many a poor soul who has dared to struggle under the heel of the tyrant. Pray God," he added reverently, "that some day these wrongs will be righted, and that the guilty will be punished for their evil-doing."

"Amen to that," assented Friar Tuck, adding, after a pause: "and, if I can read the signs of the times, that day is not far distant."

Friar Anthony shot a quick glance at his bulky guest, and, leaning forward across the table, asked:

"What do you mean by that, brother?"

"I mean that the storm-clouds are gathering which are to burst and strike the walls of Sedgemere Castle to the ground. Have you heard of one Robin Hood, a graceless freebooter who rules the Forest of Sherwood?"

"I know of him, for what man does not?" answered the little friar.

"Well, Robin Hood is here with a hundred men—a force that will soon be trebled—and he has vowed to storm the baron's stronghold and rescue the maid I spoke of."

Friar Anthony's eyes flashed with the light of enthusiasm and joy.

"Heaven strengthen his arm!" he said, "for he has set his hand to a magnificent work; and mark you, brother, freebooter or no, I have heard good report of this Robin Hood, and he is

none so graceless as you appear to think."

"Perchance not," Friar Tuck murmured, with a scarcely-concealed smile; "and yet I, too, have some knowledge of the man."

"Know you where he is to be found?" asked Anthony. "I would have audience with him, for I possess a secret which may help him in his good work."

The burly Friar Tuck's face lighted up with surprise and pleasure.

"I could guide you to him, methinks," he said slowly. "But come; this reminds me that in the midst of pleasant converse I have forgotten my errand. If you will come with me, we may happen upon this bold outlaw."

Hastily clearing away the crumbs of the feast, and concealing the tell-tale cross-bow for greater safety amid the litter which formed the bed, Friar Anthony quickly followed on Tuck's footsteps, and the pair soon had the cart moving again through the wood.

So far Friar Tuck had not revealed his identity, and it was plain that Friar Anthony had not for a moment in his mind associated his guest with the famous outlaw priest of Robin Hood's band.

Consequently, he was utterly staggered when a sudden turn in the glade brought their convoy into the middle of the foresters' camp, where their appearance was greeted with roars of welcome.

"Ho, ho! Welcome to Friar Tuck and his brother of the cloth," went up the shout.

"Friar Tuck!" gasped Anthony, staring at his brother priest.

"At your service," replied Friar Tuck, with a ponderous bow, adding in solemn voice, in imitation of Anthony's defence of his chief: "Freebooter or no, I have heard good report of this Friar Tuck, and he is none so graceless as you appear to think."

"I am sure of that, brother," laughed the little friar, now recovered from his surprise, and joining in the joke; "and glad am I to find I have so strong a friend at the court of Robin Hood. Where is the chief, that I may pay him homage?"

Robin Hood had recently returned from reconnoitring the castle. He had been watching the arrival of the two friars with an amused smile on his lips, and he now stepped forward and bade Friar Anthony welcome to the camp.

"As a friend of our good Friar Tuck here, it is needless to say you are trebly welcome. I am only sorry that, a man of peace yourself, you find us now in warlike mood."

"My brother has told me something concerning your venture," replied Friar Anthony, "and it was regarding this that I asked him to guide me to your presence, though I little thought that he was a privileged person in the camp. He has told me that you intend to attempt to carry Sedgemere Castle by assault to rescue a certain captive maid. Good sir, there are immured within the dungeons of that castle three score wretched prisoners whose cry for freedom is heartrending as this girl's, and it is to help them all that I have come to you to impart a secret by which your contemplated attack may be doubly effective."

Robin Hood led his guest to the gnarled roots of a tree, and there bade him be seated. Then, signalling to the foresters to withdraw, he sank down beside him.

"Say on," he said. "There is none to hear us now save the birds overhead."

"You have reconnoitred the stronghold?" queried Friar Anthony earnestly.

"This very morning I made the circuit of the mere and surveyed it from all points."

"Then you have formed your idea for the attack?"

"Nay, that I have not yet, for the causeway that leads to the gate is so admirably defended that I should lose a hundred men before we could reach the end; and then, with the drawbridge raised, we should be no nearer gaining the castle. As for boats, the mere is so overgrown with sedge that I fear the rafts would be unmanageable."

"True; but I know a way to reach the walls which I believe is unknown to any

living inhabitant of the castle," Friar Anthony said. "The secret was imparted to me by an old man, now dead, who had received it down from generations—doubtless from the days when the Romans had an armed camp upon the island. It concerns a causeway, now sunk invisible below the slime and mud, which runs from the shore to the rock. The old man had a son; who for some slight wrong-doing was hauled before Sir Brian and flung into one of the Dungeons of Despair, as they are known hereabouts."

"I have heard of them," Robin Hood interrupted. "But continue your story, good priest."

"Possessed of the knowledge of the secret way," continued Friar Anthony, "the father set to work to free the lad from captivity, and on dark nights waded across, unseen by the sentinels, to the base of the castle, where by ceaseless efforts he gradually freed the iron bars which secured the window of an empty cell. So cunningly did he work that he secured access at last to the castle itself, and even to the door of his son's own prison. Then, just when his plans seemed ripe and success was in his grasp, one morning he gazed over to the castle wall and there saw three corpses hanging from the battlements. One of the bodies was that of his own son, for whose liberty he had slaved nigh upon a year. The old man came to me heartbroken, sank under his sorrows, and died in my cell, though not before he had pointed out the marks which had guided him over the hidden path, and bound me to a vow that if ever friends came to attack the infamous abode I was to divulge the secret, but only then."

Robin Hood clapped the good man upon the shoulder.

"Gramercy! but you have brought me cheering news," he declared, "and if the old man's bones will be easier in their grave for the undoing of this villain, Sir Brian de Beauvrage, they shall have perfect peace at last, for now I can see my way to success. To-night you and I, good friar, will reconnoitre this hidden track and test it for ourselves."

CHAPTER 5.

In the Lion's Den.

THAT afternoon the first of the reinforcements which Lightfoot had been sent to beat up began to arrive at the camp, and the scene round the great camp-fire became doubly animated.

As soon as each band had fed and rested for a space, so the word was given to march, and the parties were dispatched under the care of guides to reinforce those portions of the besieging line to which Robin Hood directed them.

With the band that came from their own quarters rode Wilfrid Wyke, now almost recovered from his hurts.

"I could not stay behind while you were here fighting for me and mine," he replied to Robin Hood's gentle reproach at his too early appearance in the field. "I shall grow stronger more quickly now that I am where I can rest my eyes upon the walls which encircle Hilda. Faith! the sight of every gallant yeoman here sends new life into my veins!"

"Well, we shall need every arm that can wield a sword before we gain the walls, that I can plainly see, so get you strong quickly to bear a part in the fight," was the chief's good-natured answer.

Night was now settling quickly down, and anxious to test the value of the new discovery to the full Robin Hood set out with Friar Anthony towards the lake.

Arrived at a point almost at the opposite side from that of the castle causeway, the priest, who had taken care to strike a path through the forest so that they should be in the shelter of the trees, turned towards the lake and stopped at the stump of an ancient oak-tree.

Thrusting his hand into the thick herbage which almost embedded it, he drew out a sturdy staff and advanced silently to the water's edge, followed by Robin Hood.

Before them was a waste of shallow water, barely hiding treacherous and deep mud, thickly planted with tall sedges, now withered and rustling with a strange ghostly crackle in the evening breeze.

Girding up his frock, Friar Anthony advanced boldly, though at the first step he sank to the knees: then, after a few paces, he returned to Robin Hood's side.

"This is the sunken path," he whispered. "For a hundred full paces it runs to the west, and then it bends towards the great turret which flanks the eastern wall. There is but scant foothold at the base; but little is needed, for the grated window stands only waist-high. What say you—shall we try the path?"

Robin Hood pondered for a moment, glancing at the starless sky as if weighing the risks of discovery from the Norman sentinels; then he said:

"Lead on; and for the love of Heaven move steadily, or this discovery will avail us nothing."

Without raising scarcely a ripple, the friar slid into the inky waters, and the King of Sherwood followed. Each had armed himself with a pole by which to feel his way. Cautiously they waded forward, yard by yard, waist deep in the slimy ooze. One hundred paces they counted, and then they turned their faces towards the turret, which loomed up faintly in the darkness.

Now they could hear faintly the ringing footsteps of the watch on the battlements; and once, as their approach sent a leash of awakened wild-fowl helter-skelter away among the reeds, there came a challenge which sent their hearts into their mouths.

But the chaffing hail from a second sentinel, who imagined that his comrade's alarm was caused by the splashing of a marauding pike, showed that their presence was still undiscovered and unsuspected.

At last, chilled to the bone, they gained the base of the towering wall and crept on to the ledge of rock.

The grated aperture, which, though narrow, Robin Hood perceived was wide enough to admit a man, faced them.

The friar ran his fingers over the bars, then, following the directions given him by the dead man, gave a turn and a wrench, and the first one came away without a sound. The rest were quickly served in similar fashion, and Robin Hood thrust his head and shoulders

through, and listened. Not a sound came from within the castle.

Producing a coil of cord with which he had provided himself, he signed to the priest to make one end fast, then he crept feet foremost through the aperture and cautiously descended into the cell.

As soon as his feet touched the flagged pavement he started to explore, feeling his way cautiously round the walls until he came to the massive door. The lock, he could feel, was a mass of rust, and he paused long before testing it. But the desire to go on was strong within him, and slowly he began to turn the handle.

The creaking of the rusty bolts almost made him relinquish the task; but the deathly stillness without encouraged him to continue. At last the door swung ajar on its complaining hinges, and he found himself in a gloomy corridor, descending at one end by a flight of steps, which, he surmised, must lead to the deeper dungeons. At the other end, however, a faint light flickered.

Evidently a torch was flaming in a niche, concealed by the bend of the passage.

Impelled by a strange fascination, and scarcely counting the danger, he crept towards the light and peeped round. The sight which met his gaze sent his hand to the dagger in his belt, for there on a bench, thrust back in an alcove over which a lamp flared, was a man reclining fast asleep. The great bunch of keys which dangled from his belt showed that he was the gaoler.

Robin Hood scarcely dared to breathe as he gazed, fascinated, on the sleeping figure.

The clanging of a door and the sounds of men's voices aroused him to a sense of his danger. The gaoler had heard the sound, too, for he sprang to his feet with a growl and, sleepily unhooking the lamp, advanced into the passage. He was met by a burly knight, whom Robin Hood set down at once as Sir Brian de Beauvrage. At his heels came a second knight, with a malignant scowl upon his pale features, and close behind two grim-looking men-at-arms, who bore between them the body of a man clad in black and silver,

with head lolling hideously on his breast, the face white as death and his hair stiff with congealed blood from a gaping wound in the scalp.

"The baron and Sir Rufus de Gervoise at their evil work again!" Robin Hood muttered to himself. "By my halidom, but I must see the end of this! Would that I had half a dozen brave lads in yonder cell, and Sedgemere Castle would soon lack master and guest!"

"How now, Dog of the Dungeons!" cried Sir Brian with an ugly laugh as the gaoler fell back, gaping at the sudden appearance of his master. "Bestir yourself and lead me to a dungeon for this guest of mine! Don't stand blinking there as if I were some ghost, dolt! Out with your keys and light the way."

Without a word the gaoler turned and advanced towards the spot where Robin Hood was hidden.

With quick, catlike steps the outlaw gained the door, and closing it behind him set his back against it. In the clatter of footsteps upon the pavement the creaking of the hinges passed detection.

Robin Hood held his breath as the steps grew nearer.

Would the gaoler fix upon this cell, or go to the deeper tiers?

"Faugh! The stench of these burrows sickens me!" he heard Sir Rufus say.

Sir Brian's brutal response was lost in the clang and din of the men descending the slimy steps, though his coarse laugh rang along the vaulted roof, and found answer in the clink of fetters, as the wretched prisoners sprang from their sleep at the unwonted disturbance.

The danger for the moment past, Robin Hood once more crept into the passage and followed noiselessly the flickering light, now receding deeper and deeper into the bowels of the rock.

On either side the King of Sherwood could discern narrow doors heavily bolted, and the clang of chains and weary moanings which came from all sides told him that he was moving amid the Dungeons of Despair!

The heavy atmosphere almost choked him, but he pressed on, determined to keep the Normans in view.

At last the light stopped, and there was a creaking of rusty locks and hinges as a door was opened.

The two men-at-arms passed into the dungeon, and the knights followed.

"Well, Sir Rufus, you see that I have provided snug quarters for your rival to the heart of the fair Hilda," laughed the baron.

"Ay! Set the coxcomb down, and let him sleep among the toads!" the knight growled, flashing a glance of relentless hate at the senseless man's face, showing ghastly pale in the yellow rays of the lamp. "Fool! to think that he could thwart my plans and go unscathed. Lie there, dog! and when you come to your senses you will remember that Sir Rufus de Gervoise brooks the interference of no man, and lets no blow pass without a tenfold revenge!"

The men-at-arms deposited the senseless figure on the slimy floor, and the gaoler fitted a rusty shackle to the ankle and locked it.

"Let that iron eat into your very soul, Sir Denis!" Sir Rufus hissed, savagely spurning the recumbent form with his mailed foot as he strode towards the door. "Perhaps if ever you see the light again you will learn to keep a civil tongue between your teeth when in the presence of a De Gervoise.

"Come, Sir Brian," he added with a laugh, "now that we have this cur safely kennelled, let us get to arms and beat up the pack of knaves without the gates!"

As Robin Hood fled up the stairs he heard the door clang, and knew that another crime had been added to the black record of Sedgemere, for which he was so soon to demand a reckoning.

Panting with indignation and horror, and dizzy with the fever-laden air of the dungeons, Robin Hood gained his cell, closed the door, and seizing the cord, signalled to the friar to make fast. In two minutes he was again crouching on the grassy ledge.

The bars were rapidly fitted into their sockets and, without a word, the two men slipped into the water and began their perilous journey to land.

Setting out at a jog-trot, they soon reached the camp, where, under the

genial influences of a blazing fire and a steaming posset of mulled wine concocted by Friar Tuck, the blood was once more set stirring in their frozen limbs.

But Robin Hood, with the news that the foe were going to sally forth to a night attack, did not lose an instant in preparing his forces against surprise.

Short and sharp his orders rang out, and right and left ran his messengers to warn the outposts which held the paths leading to the castle.

Then, ignoring the discomfort of his wet clothing, he marshalled such of the men as he could spare from the defence of the camp, and himself took the road towards the causeway and the great gate.

Friar Tuck and Friar Anthony, the latter now garbed in one of the outlaw priest's frocks, which hung about him like a sack and nearly tripped him at every step, strode on in Robin Hood's wake, for the little priest flatly refused to stay within the camp.

The Sherwood King found Will Scarlet anxiously awaiting him, for though Will had deployed his men with masterly skill to outflank any force issuing from the gate, he was not a sufficiently experienced general to have confidence in his own dispositions.

Robin Hood made a hasty but silent examination of his lieutenant's preparations, reinforcing this point and withdrawing men from that; and then, with Little John, Wilfrid, and the two friars, he lay down to wait for the onslaught of the Normans.

His camp-fire reddened the sky with its glare, and the outlaw knew instinctively that Sir Brian, confident in his surprise, would press forward to surround the bivouac, little dreaming that the foresters were in ambush at his very gate.

The preparations within the castle had been made with absolute silence, for, almost before Robin Hood was aware that the force was approaching, the leading ranks of the Normans were fling over the drawbridge on foot and advancing along the causeway.

On they came, without a sound save for the creaking of leather belts and the jarring of mail.

Keeping in close formation, they trooped on up the dark track between the dense undergrowth, from which twelve score of shafts were pointing, ready notched, to shoot into the shadowy mass of marching men.

The hoot of an owl, twice repeated, was the signal, and as soon as the tail of the column had cleared the bridge Robin Hood sounded the cry, and, with fifty picked men, leapt up and dashed to the causeway-head, to cut off the retreat of the band.

In a trice a hail of arrows whistled into the Normans' close-packed ranks, and a great shout rent the air, to be answered by yells of surprise and the screams of wounded men.

Flinging their bows aside, the Saxons rushed to close quarters with bills and swords, and a terrific hand-to-hand encounter was soon waging in the pitchy blackness of the forest.

Quick to take advantage of the blow, Robin Hood and his men dashed along the causeway in the hope of seizing the gate before the drawbridge could be raised, or friends distinguished from enemies.

But a flight of cross-bow bolts and the creaking of the ponderous bridge showed that the defenders were on the alert against the ruse, while from the battlements rang Sir Brian's voice, shouting:

"Back, you scum! Back to your kennels! for you cannot hoodwink the Baron of Sedgemere Castle. Shoot them down, bowmen! Shoot, though you cannot see friend from foe!"

Foiled in their attempt, Robin Hood and his men turned just in time to see a great mass of men hurling itself with wild shouts of terror along the causeway.

The case of the foresters was desperate, for, with the black waters all around and a frenzied, savage horde cutting off their retreat, death seemed to stare them all in the face. Nor did the bowmen from the castle cease to shower their bolts into their ranks.

Before Robin Hood could collect his scattered and now almost demoralised forces, he found himself overwhelmed by the tide of Normans, hacking, hewing, and thrusting for dear life.

Twice he went down, but the hercu-

lean arm of Little John swung him to his feet again.

Fortunately, in the darkness and confusion, there were few to recognise the foresters as foes, the main body thinking that they were only some of their own comrades who had made an early escape from the conflict.

But with the pressure of those behind struggling wildly to get away from the slashing bills and blades of Will Scarlet's men, forcing those in front inch by inch off the causeway into the dark waters of the mere, the fight for life there was as desperate as the battle waging on the shore.

Norman clutched Norman in a death-grip, and smote left and right in his effort to save himself from a watery grave.

Sir Brian, convinced at last that the struggling mass were the survivors of his own sortie, gave orders for the drawbridge to be lowered, and with a wild yell of joy the panic-stricken men-at-arms surged forward across the bridge into the gates of the castle.

Unable to stem the tide, and powerless in the press, Little John and the majority of the unlucky participants of Robin Hood's attempted ruse were swept along and carried into the courtyard.

But even when the giant found himself actually in the lion's den, never for a moment did he lose head or heart.

If he could have rallied his comrades around him, he had a mind to raise the battle-cry of the band and seize the gate in the confusion, trusting to the yeomen without following up their success.

But his heart sank as he heard the crash as the drawbridge was once more drawn up; and the death-yell which went up from more than one throat told him that many a poor wretch of the garrison had been left to meet his end.

For a moment Little John glared wildly round, uncertain what to do. What had been the fate of his chief, he knew not, nor could he see anything of Friar Tuck or the priest Anthony among the scattered remnants of his party now being driven hither and thither in the swaying mob.

At last one man in Lincoln green stumbled by him, and reaching out his hand Little John stayed him. It was Wilfred, whom strange fate had thrown into the trap which held his sister.

The giant beckoned to the young man to follow him, and thrust his way roughly through the jostling rabble, now railing at their defeat.

As yet the Normans were too much engaged with their own hurts to notice those of their enemies who had been swept in with them in their wild retreat.

A narrow portal opened off the courtyard, and Little John, closely followed by Wilfred, gained it undetected, just as the first shout of discovery went up, followed by the cry of a man in his death-agony:

"A Saxon! Hunt him down! See, there's another! After the dogs! Death to the Saxons!"

The yells of revenge, as each of their less fortunate comrades was spied out, only steeled the two fugitives to a more desperate determination to escape.

The narrow doorway admitted to a flight of winding steps, up which they sprang.

A sudden turn brought them on to the battlements, from which on one side they looked out across the lake, and on the other directly down into the courtyard.

Standing watching the spectacle beneath were three of the Norman sentinels.

Little John and Wilfred came so suddenly upon them that they had no time to turn back. The sound of running footsteps made the Normans wheel, and a shout went up from one as he recognised the forester's garb.

They leaped forward to bar the Saxons' passage with their spears; but the giant sprang on them with a snarling cry, and striking aside the glittering points, was in among them, striking right and left for life and liberty with such good will that the sentinels turned and fled, shouting that the Saxons had seized the castle.

Without pausing for an instant to regain breath, Little John and Wilfred

ran in the direction that the fugitives had taken.

A second stairway, evidently leading to the castle-yard, presented itself; but they kept on, and flinging open a door, found themselves in a corridor dimly lit by a torch flaring in a bracket at the further end.

A second door, which stood open, brought them into a large chamber. By its tapestried walls and luxurious furniture, they guessed it must be a private apartment of the baron's.

As they paused, uncertain where to hide, loud cries and the clatter of footsteps, increasing every instant in volume, told them that the pursuit had been taken up.

In vain they sought for some means of escape. A ponderous door, locked on the outer side, barred their way. A minute would have sufficed for Little John to batter the lock to pieces with one of the massive stools scattered about the apartment; but already the glimmer of approaching torches lit the passage, and angry cries told that their foes were upon them.

Then an inspiration struck Wilfrid. Swinging aside the hanging tapestry, he beckoned to Little John to follow him, squeezed between the arras and the wall, and sidled along to the further end of the chamber, hoping against hope that the hanging folds might permit them to escape unnoticed.

The searchers had not yet reached the chamber, for evidently they were leaving no possible hiding-place unexplored.

Then a stroke of good luck befell the fugitives.

As Little John, panting with suppressed excitement, stood flattened against the rudely-wainscoted wall, one of the upright panels within arm's-length slid back an inch or two, and the gleam of a lamp appeared in the chink.

Scarcely pausing to think, the giant thrust his fingers into the aperture and tore the panel open.

Then he forced himself through, and found, to his amazement, an old woman shrinking with terror in the secret passage.

He clutched the old crone's wrist in

his iron grip, till the pain brought her to her senses.

"Not a sound!" he hissed. "Show us some means of escape, and I will make you rich. Betray us, and you die!"

He forced the old woman before him down the passage, so narrow and low-pitched that he could scarcely squeeze himself along, until at last they stood in a small chamber from which, apparently, there was no egress.

Here they were quickly joined by Wilfrid, who had only stayed to slide the panel into its place and secure it.

The old crone seemed to have recovered from her first fright, for after glancing at their forester's garb, she set up a shrill cackle, which Little John roughly checked by covering her wrinkled face with one of his huge hands.

"Silence, old screech-owl, or 'twill fare badly with you," he growled.

"If you harm me, you will but run your heads into the noose thereby," chuckled the old crone. "Heigho! Methought I heard strange noises. Saxons within, and Saxons without. These be stirring times for old Sedge-mere Castle! But, hark ye! if it is for the undoing of the carrion breed of De Beauvrage, I will do my best to save you. Follow me."

So saying, the old woman hobbled to the opposite wall of the chamber, and touching a concealed spring, opened a second secret doorway through which she hopped with surprising agility for one of her years.

Little John and Wilfrid followed just as quickly, and found themselves again in a narrow passage, scarcely shoulder-wide, apparently concealed in one of the castle walls.

It rambled on, now up and now down, twisting and turning in perplexing fashion.

At last the hag paused, and cunningly shading the light which she carried, beckoned them to approach closer. Then she uncovered a tiny peep-hole in the solid masonry, and bade Wilfrid look through.

"See," she whispered, "we have already a maid of your race a prisoner in there——"

"Great Heaven above! my sister!" the young Saxon cried, falling back into the arms of Little John, who vainly tried to stifle the words.

At that moment a woman's scream rang out, followed by a man's voice raised in brutal anger.

Wilfrid tore himself from Little John's grasp at the sound of his sister's cry, and shouting "Hilda! Hilda! A rescue! a rescue!" set to tearing at the massive blocks of stone like a madman.

In her terror the old woman let the lamp fall, and the passage was plunged in darkness.

Little John stood bewildered. Discovery was now inevitable.

Wilfrid's shout had evidently reached the ears of the occupants of Hilda's chamber, for the voices ceased. Then came the sound of a heavy footfall, and the grinding noise of moving masonry, and a shaft of light illumined the passage, revealing a short flight of stone steps. There, at the foot, stood Sir Rufus de Gervoise, sword in hand, demanding who dared to disturb him.

With a short, sharp cry of revenge, Wilfrid rushed past the old crone, now sunk in a heap upon the floor, and with one bound leapt the steps and flung himself upon his father's murderer.

Fortunately the Norman was taken too much by surprise to receive him upon his sword-point, and the two, grappling like wrestlers, rolled through the secret doorway into Hilda's chamber.

Little John plunged down to the assistance of his comrade, but as he gained the door a sound from the passage above sent his heart into his mouth.

Their flight by the secret way had been discovered, and they were pursued.

At the sight of her brother, whom she had long since mourned as dead, Hilda swooned away, and now lay senseless on the floor.

Little John had some thought of picking her up and fighting his way through all opposition to the castle gate, but the thought of leaving Wilfrid in the clutches of those who would show him no mercy deterred him.

Sir Rufus had now freed himself from

his antagonist's grasp; and recovering his sword he stood with his back to the wall, alternately breathing defiance and shouting for help.

His cries were answered from the passage, and though Little John sprang to the entrance and with a heavy stool struck three men senseless as they emerged, others eluded his blows, and in a minute the chamber was full of armed men, and the two yeomen were borne to the ground, fighting like lions.

When they had been bound, Sir Rufus sheathed his blade, raging all the time like one possessed.

"Hang me these scullions from the topmost turret!" he roared. "Away with them, and let their carcasses serve as a warning to the curs without that Sir Rufus, though at bay, can still bite. Nay, hold! Clap them in the dungeons, and to-morrow will I find some more fitting death for them upon the battlements, so that their rebel-kind can witness their last struggles.

"Take away this jade, too, and secure her in the darkest cell there is in Sedge-mere!" he added, pointing to the inanimate form of the fair Hilda. "Away with them, and be not too gentle in your handling of the vermin!"

With kicks and cuffs, Little John and Wilfrid were dragged to their feet and hustled down the stairway which led towards the dungeons.

In vain Wilfrid implored to be allowed to go to his sister's side for one brief minute. The rough men-at-arms only mocked at him; and when in despair he flung himself down, they dragged him by the heels, until unconsciousness brought him a brief respite in his misery.

Down they went by the very passage that they knew Robin Hood had traversed that same night, and Little John's heart beat high in the hope that they might be thrown into the dungeon which looked out on the submerged causeway.

But the gaoler hurried them on, and he found himself thrust with his senseless comrade into an evil-smelling cell, which by the flare of the torch he could see was already tenanted by another prisoner, who sat up, staring with

bloodshot eyes at the newcomers as they made their appearance.

As soon as the gaoler and the guard had shackled their prisoners and withdrawn, and the rattle of the last bolt in the massive door had ceased, Little John turned to Wilfrid, and, scraping up a heap of mouldy straw from the cell-floor, made a rude pillow for his head.

"These be times of hard knocks," he growled, in the direction of their companion in misery. "But, faith, as I have been giving more than I have received of late, I suppose I must not grumble at the turn in the luck."

"Are you of Robin Hood's men?" asked the prisoner wearily.

"Ay! How came you to think of that?"

"I have occasion to know the colour of your doublets, for not many months since I had the honour of crossing blades with your chief, and a right skilful antagonist I found him."

"But, sir, how come you here in this cell?—for by your speech you are a Norman and a nobleman," asked Little John, in amazement.

"This is mine host's way of showing his hospitality to a guest, for such I was. I am Sir Denis de Mervaulx," replied the prisoner, with the imperturbable drawl that marked him as the knight of the black and silver.

In a few words he related the story of his interference on behalf of the captive Hilda, and the craven blow which had struck him down. Beyond this he knew no more, except to find himself, when he recovered, lying fettered on the dungeon floor.

"And here methinks I must lie for the rest of my days, unless your good fellows burn out this nest of vermin and set us all free."

"Ay, that they will, rest assured of that," said Little John proudly. "The lad lying senseless here at my side owes you thanks, for he is the brother of the very maid you protected."

And as briefly as possible he told the story of the sortie and his own strange adventures up to the time of capture.

"But the last blow is not yet struck, and we have a secret which makes the

castle as good as ours. Alas! I know not if poor Robin still lives, for he was torn from me amid the fight on the causeway. But my comrades will never rest so long as Norman remains within these walls.

"For myself and my friend here I fear me rescue will come too late," the giant went on, "for the craven Sir Rufus has decreed that we two shall die on the battlements to-morrow. But when our deaths are avenged, and the captives of these dungeons liberated, you will find true friends among our rough fellows, should you deign to accept their friendship."

"A thousand thanks, my brave fellow," Sir Denis replied gratefully. "Norman though I am, I would rather be the humblest member of your outlaw band than associate again with the pack of tyrants and cutthroats, who, in our king's absence, bring shame on the fair name of Normandy."

CHAPTER 6.

Robin Hood's Daring Ruse.

WHEN Sir Brian de Beauvrage gave the orders for the drawbridge to be lowered to admit the remnants of his beaten force, and the mass of men surged forward to gain the shelter of the gate, Robin Hood, seeing himself being swept to certain captivity, decided to make a jump into the waters of the lake.

By a herculean effort he tore his way to the edge of the stream of struggling humanity.

Catching sight of Friar Tuck at the moment, he cried to him to follow, and dived from the bridge.

The burly priest, who was being rolled hither and thither in the turmoil, charged forward like a bull, hurling two men headlong into the lake; then, dragging Friar Anthony out by the scruff of the neck, he jumped for his life.

The two priests alighted with a mighty splash, but bobbing up again like a cork, Friar Tuck was soon striking out for land, towing his half-drowned brother behind him.

"There, by St. Dunstan!" he panted, as he dragged the luckless friar on to

dry land and left him to splutter and kick until he regained his breath, "perhaps you have drunk now of water to your full satisfaction. Come, brother, if you gasp there much longer some archer from the walls will spy your fat carcase and test it with a bolt. Bestir yourself an you want to preserve a whole hide on your back!"

The threat brought Friar Anthony to his feet in an instant, and the two gathered up their soaked frocks and ran for the shelter of the woods.

Steering their way to the rendezvous, they found Robin Hood with Will Scarlet, surrounded by the rest of the yeomen.

The roll had been called, but over a score had not answered to their names.

Anxiously they waited, but there was no sign of Little John or Wilfrid returning, and Robin Hood at last was compelled to admit that either they lay at the bottom of the lake or they were within the castle.

The sortie had been driven back with terrible loss to the Normans; but set against the foresters' own tale of dead, the victory seemed woefully insignificant.

One resolve was in every heart. Sedgemere Castle must fall, and every stone must be overturned before they would give up hopes of seeing their comrades again.

Robin Hood, with the keen wit of a soldier, perceived that if his advantage was to be made secure the first blow must be followed instantly by a second.

With a night's respite and the courage lent by daylight, the Normans would recover from their panic, and their spirit of resistance would be doubled.

Calling his lieutenants around him, Robin made known his decision, and soon parties of foresters were at work felling trees and carrying logs down to the water's edge at a point sheltered from the bowmen of the castle.

"On three rafts which we will build," Robin Hood explained to Will Scarlet, "you must, under cover of the arrows of fifty picked archers posted in the fringe of the wood, push out and make a resolute attack upon the walls. No

matter if you fail, so long as I can wade across the sunken causeway with fifty men unseen. In this pitchy darkness, and with your men thundering at the gate, this should be no impossible feat. Once within the castle, I have no doubt that we shall be able to seize the bridge long enough to admit your men, and then let it be fire and sword, and Heaven help the right!"

The making of the three log-rafts lashed with ropes of withies was no difficult task to the skilled woodsmen, and in less than two hours the floating platforms, each capable of holding some fifteen men, were launched silently.

As soon as the last preparations were complete, Robin Hood set out with his trusty half-hundred to the opposite side of the lake, from which the sunken causeway ran.

Then, after giving strict injunctions to his men to follow close and in absolute silence, he gave the signal which was to commence the attack.

The faint shouts of the Norman sentries told that the first flight of arrows had gone whistling over the battlements.

A thick mist now lay upon the waters of the mere, entirely hiding the distant castle; but Robin Hood, without thought of failure, and with the plucky Friar Anthony as guide, plunged in, followed by his band.

Guided by the din, which increased with every pace, and by the soundings of the pole which he kept thrust out before him, Friar Anthony led his comrades one hundred paces to the west, and then struck towards the castle.

Now and again a man's foot slipped, and he was soused head over heels in the black waters; but each managed to regain his feet in silence, and the party waded steadily on.

At last the walls of the castle towered above them, and Robin Hood and the little friar set to work to clear the bars from the window.

The rope was again made fast, and the chief slid feet first into the dungeon.

The rest stood shivering waist-deep in the water, waiting for the signal to follow.

Above them they could hear the singing of the arrows flying wide across the castle, and the hoarse cries of attackers and attacked.

Robin Hood, as soon as his foot touched the floor, groped his way to the door and shot back the bolts. A light flickered dimly in the passage, and the sound of shuffling feet showed that the gaoler was still at his post, in spite of the turmoil overhead.

Robin Hood drew his dagger from its sheath, and stole forward.

The rustle of the outlaw's stealthy tread, falling on ears sharpened by excitement, made the gaoler turn, though too late to save himself, or even cry out.

Forbearing to use the blade in cold blood, Robin Hood brought the heavy hilt down upon the man's shaggy head, and he dropped like a stone.

The great bunch of rusty keys at his belt was quickly unhooked, and a gag thrust between his teeth.

With the lamp in his hand, Robin Hood ran back to the cell and signalled all safe. Immediately man after man slid noiselessly down the rope, and grasping sword or axe, fell into his place.

When the whole of the fifty men, including the indomitable little friar, were marshalled in the dungeon, Robin Hood placed himself at their head, and they sallied forth silently into the passage.

Having first secured the entrance to the dungeons, and hidden parties of his men on the flanks, so that it was impossible for the Normans to bar their advance, Robin Hood ran back with two men armed with hammers, and made for the cells beneath.

"Little John! Wilfrid!" he cried, in a low voice, as he passed from cell to cell.

"By the bones of my grandfather, but that is Robin Hood's voice!" came the gruff tones of the giant from behind a stout, iron-studded door. "Ho! Robin Hood to the rescue! Rouse up, Wilfrid! Help is at hand!"

The task of fitting the proper key was a lengthy one, but Robin Hood was fearful of having to resort to battering

the door down, although the din that the excited prisoners were making now was more than sufficient in itself to ensure discovery.

But the door swung open at last, and Little John, as happy as a child, and only anxious that the fight would not commence before he could be freed, was having his irons struck off his limbs with deft blows of the hammers. Soon Wilfrid was also free, though he was too weak to rise.

"Leave him to my charge, Sir Outlaw," came a voice from the shadows. "If you will have the goodness to sever these fetters in the same way as my giant friend's over yonder, I will promise to look to this young man's safety."

Robin Hood turned to see the Sluggard Knight, now bemired with slime and bloodstained, but still as suave and cool as if he were in the ante-chamber of the king's own palace.

"You look astonished to see a Norman here in this filthy prison, and no wonder," Sir Denis resumed, before Robin Hood could recover from his surprise. "How and why I came here your friends will tell. Meanwhile, I—Sir Denis de Mervaulx—am very much at your service; and if, when I have seen this lad in proper hands, I can do anything to aid you, my sword is at your command."

"Generously spoken, Sir Knight, and though I scarcely expected to see Norman sword turned against Norman, nevertheless your offer is none the less welcome. Stay; I have a particular service for you. Somewhere within this castle is a maid—Hilda, of Wykenham—brought hither by the hound De Gervoise."

"She is in one of these dungeons," Little John said, "for they brought us all hither not three hours since."

"Excellent. Seek her out, Sir Knight, and guard her with your life. Twelve men will I leave with you, and these hammers. Let them free the fetters of every prisoner they find, and let those that can strike a blow for liberty arm themselves and follow to our aid. Little John, your strong arm will be needed, I trow, so forward."

Robin Hood, followed by the giant, armed with a mighty axe, ran up the stairs, and disregarding the yells of the prisoners, now pounding on the doors with their fetters in a frenzy of delight, gave the order to advance.

Little John, with ten good men, had orders to make for the courtyard, there to seize the gate against all odds and lower the drawbridge.

The rest Robin Hood divided into two bands, each mounting to the battlements to attack the defenders on the walls.

With shouts of "Robin Hood to the rescue! Sweet liberty or death!" the three parties, making noise enough for a force five times their number, flung themselves upon the enemies.

A flight of arrows sent whistling along the parapets brought many a Norman archer groaning to the ground.

The rest fell back in huddled groups in nooks and angles of the battlements, too surprised at the sudden attack to raise a hand in their own defence.

Again two score of arrows sped on their deadly errand, and in the close-packed ranks scarce one could miss its mark.

But, urged on by their leaders, the Normans rallied, and steel-coated spearmen ran forward to come to grips.

Flinging aside their bows, the yeomen closed with their opponents. Spears were thrust aside, and woodmen's axes rang on steel head-pieces.

Inch by inch the lads in green won their way forward.

Robin Hood, in the forefront, laid about him with a huge double-edged sword, which he had picked up in preference to his lighter blade.

But, though his eyes blazed straight ahead at his opponents, his ears were straining to catch the sound which should tell him that the gate was won.

Far below he could hear the cries of Will Scarlet's men, and by the thundering splashes, which every now and again reached him, he knew that the rafts were moving forward to the attack, and that the Normans were heaving down masses of stone coping in an effort to sink them.

Still the Normans fell back sullenly,

and it seemed as if the gallant fifty were to win the fortress.

But Sir Brian was yet to be reckoned with.

His skilled eye, surveying the scene below, had estimated Will Scarlet's attack upon the gate at its proper worth, and so turned to rally every defender to crush the force which had sprung up so inexplicably within his castle.

At the head of a score of fresh men he flung himself upon Robin Hood's band, and gathering up the disheartened ranks of his own force, was soon pressing the foresters back along the battlement by sheer weight of numbers.

"Rally! Rally! Death to the Normans!" cried Robin Hood, dealing stroke on stroke on the advancing ranks.

But his efforts to stem the tide were in vain. In an instant the yeomen were swept away, and only held their ground when they reached the narrow stair by which they had ascended.

Assuring himself that they could now hold their own, Robin Hood ran down the steps and gained the courtyard, hoping to see the great gateway in the hands of Little John's small band.

But he was doomed to disappointment, for though the ten were engaged in a gallant struggle for the guard-house, it was apparent that they were outnumbered.

Nor could he see any sign of Little John's giant form.

Dawn was now breaking above the castle, and the grey, misty light slowly revealed the horrors of that terrible night.

In truth, the yeomen were in hard straits, and none realised the danger more than Robin Hood.

As a score of plans for relief were coursing through his mind, there came a sound which set his heart bounding. It was like the distant roar of an angry sea hurling itself upon a jagged reef.

The Dungeons of Despair had given up their living dead!

Robin Hood sprang aside as the din grew nearer, uncertain whether he might not fall a victim to the first blind rush of men too intoxicated with

hope of revenge to distinguish friend from foe.

Out they came, helter-skelter; gaunt men with bleary eyes, matted and dishevelled locks and tattered garments streaming in the wind. Some had fragments of their shackles still about their necks and wrists. All were armed with iron bars, great keys, bolts torn from doors, and such weapons as they could lay their hands to.

As they came into the grey dawn they hung back, dazed by the light, which seemed to scorch their withered eyeballs.

Then, swaying forward, with savage, inarticulate cries, they rushed into the courtyard.

With the cry of "Robin Hood to the rescue! Follow me, all!" the outlaw chief sprang to their head and led them to the attack on the guard-house.

The Normans who held the gate had meantime been reinforced by Sir Rufus de Gervoise, who realised that safety only lay in holding the drawbridge between Robin Hood and his reinforcements.

With nigh on forty men opposing him, well posted, and covered by cross-bowmen from the battlements above, Robin Hood saw that the task of capture was to be no easy one. But he knew that he was leading men who would stick at nothing in their lust for revenge, and kept on with a stout heart.

The remnants of Little John's small band had long since given up the hopeless struggle, and before the chief was an unbroken wall of spears and blades.

"A Robin Hood! A Robin Hood! Death to the tyrants!" rose the fierce yell behind him. "A Beauvrage! A Gervoise!" echoed the defiant cry from the Norman ranks.

With only naked breasts to oppose the spear points, the contest seemed terribly one-sided; but the pent-up hatred and fury of years was steeling those emaciated limbs, and bars were swung with as deadly effect as battle-axe.

Robin Hood singled out the tall figure of Sir Rufus de Gervoise, and cut his way towards him.

The Norman knight leapt to meet him, his eyes flashing fire behind the bars of his visor.

"Dog of a Saxon!" he roared. "Look your last upon the sun, for this time you shall not escape me!"

"Norman tyrant!" retorted Robin Hood, circling his two-handed blade over his head, and springing to the attack. "Look to yourself, and make your peace with Heaven for your villainous crimes!"

The Norman whirled his mace, and struck blow after blow at the outlaw, who needed all his agility to avoid the deadly hail.

The rest of the Normans, who had taken refuge in the guard-house from the prisoners' ferocious attack, took fresh heart at seeing their leader's apparent advantage, and Robin Hood and his ragged supporters were hustled back into the centre of the courtyard, where the unequal conditions of the fight rapidly began to tell their tale.

But where was Little John all this time?

The giant had bravely endeavoured to carry the guard-house and seize the mechanism by which the drawbridge was lowered and the portcullis raised.

Finding the task too great for his small force, he made for the staircase leading to the flanking towers, and cutting down those who barred his way, reached the deserted chamber directly over the gate.

The head of the drawbridge was but a few feet below him. Thrusting his huge body through the narrow window, he dropped on to the beam, and, battle-axe in hand, crawled to the ringbolts at each corner, to which the chains were fastened which held it upright.

His appearance, as soon as it was noted by Will Scarlet's men on the banks and causeway, was greeted with a rousing cheer, which died away in a murmur of amazement as they saw the giant set to work to cut the iron bolts through with his axe.

One ring gave a snap, and the chains fell, clattering, leaving the drawbridge swaying dizzily by one corner.

But Little John remained as cool as ice, and calmly crawled to the other

extremity and struck blow after blow at the last remaining ringbolt.

It gave at last. The great bridge swung out and fell with a speed which threatened to shiver it to atoms when it struck the causeway.

Clinging like a cat, Little John came hurtling down, until midway, just when it seemed that he must be dashed to pieces on the stones, he sprang outwards, and, twisting head over heels, sank into the waters of the lake.

A mighty cheer went up at the gallant feat as soon as the giant's head appeared and he was seen striking out for land.

It was changed to a roar of victory when it was seen that the bridge had stood the shock, and a hundred men in Lincoln green charged forward for the gate.

Staggered by this terrible blow, the Normans within broke right and left. Robin Hood, without heeding his antagonist, ran to the guard-house. In two minutes the portcullis was raised, and Sedgemere Castle was won.

"Sir Denis! Wilfrid! Hilda! where are they?" cried Robin Hood, overwhelmed in the tide of men.

A shout echoing from the courtyard made him turn his head. There, at the entrance which led to the Dungeons of Despair, was the knight in black and silver, with Hilda swung over his left shoulder, standing at bay, defending himself with his sword against the furious attack of Sir Rufus de Gervoise.

Robin Hood ran forward with a shout, but the tyrant was doomed to fall by another weapon than the outlaw chief's. Before Robin Hood had crossed the courtyard halfway, one of the freed prisoners leapt upon the Norman, and whirling a heavy bar of iron, smote him full across the bars of the visor, crushing them like paper.

Rufus flung up his arms, and at the instant the Sluggard Knight's sword passed between the joints of his armour and pierced him to the heart.

"So perish all tyrants," said a solemn voice in Robin Hood's ear as he paused aghast at the Norman's sudden fate. He turned and saw Friar Anthony, hammer in hand, for he it

was who had worked like a demon in the dungeons freeing the prisoners of the shackles, and helping those too weak and overcome to move to places of safety.

"Amen to that," Robin Hood replied. "But what of the Baron de Beauvrage? If those yelling fiends who have suffered so much at his hands get hold of him, Heaven help him! The thought makes my blood run cold. Quick, priest! Gather up a score of men and follow me, for, monster though he be, we must save him from being torn to pieces alive."

Desultory fighting was still going on in odd corners with the more determined of the garrison, but for the most part the Normans had surrendered, and Robin Hood, as he made for the castle hall, passed several gangs of prisoners being marched under escort to the courtyard, where they were to be placed under guard.

But his one thought was to save wanton destruction of life on the part of his maddened allies from the dungeons.

As he hastened through the great hall a shudder of disgust passed over him, for there a pack of the ragged scarecrows were already drinking themselves into hopeless intoxication, quarrelling and fighting round a butt of wine which they had rolled from the cellars.

A whiff of smoke reaching his nostrils as he entered a passage told him that the torch was already at work. Came next the spluttering and crackling of flames seizing upon the parched woodwork.

But sparks and flames were unheeded by the motley crew of yeomen and prisoners, who were spread over the vast building in the eager search for booty.

Apparently Sir Brian de Beauvrage had been forgotten.

Robin Hood at length gained the tapestried chamber which had been the scene of Little John's and Wilfrid's thrilling escape, and here he ran into the latter, who, with half a dozen yeomen, had followed to his aid.

"Try the secret passage. I'll warrant we find him skulking there," cried

the youth, ripping down the heavy tapestry and dashing a panel to flinders with his axe. "After me—and bring a torch, someone!"

Scarcely waiting for the light, Wilfrid scrambled through the aperture and dashed down the secret passage, closely followed by Robin Hood.

The little chamber to which it led was empty, but a scuffling sound behind the wooden walls convinced them that someone had only just eluded them.

A few heavy strokes soon stove in the panel admitting to the second passage, and the hunt went on.

The gleam of light at the foot of the stairway showed that their quarry had passed into the chamber which had been Hilda's prison. They entered this, but it was empty.

They tried another door. It was locked. Again the axe was brought into play, but before the massive wood could be broken from its hinges a fearful cry rang from the corridor without.

It was like the roar of a wild beast as it flings itself upon its prey.

Other voices took up the shout, and when at last the door was sent crashing into the passage, and Robin Hood strode over the splintered timbers, he saw the figure of Sir Brian de Beauvraige, back to the wall, surrounded by a horde of howling men thirsting for his life.

"Give that man quarter!" shouted the outlaw. "Spare him! Back, I say!"

The men fell back, growling like beaten dogs.

Like a flash, the Norman, true to his treacherous nature, dashed through them and sprang upon the man who had saved his life.

Fortunately Robin Hood, in jumping back to elude the stroke, tripped on the broken door and fell. He escaped by a hair's-breadth, but threw his own party into such confusion that Sir Brian slipped past them and fled down the corridor, pursued by the ghoul-like mob.

There was no thought of mercy now.

The yeomen followed quickly, down corridors, along which already tongues of flames were licking, and in which the dense clouds of smoke almost drove them back.

A door brought them to the battlements and the pure air of heaven.

At the far end, in an angle of the parapet, the Norman stood at bay.

His long sword circled round him; and more than one poor wretch gained his freedom only to lose his life.

But Nemesis overtook the tyrant at last. One gaunt fellow, whose eyes betrayed the light of madness, and whose wasted limbs still displayed sinews of surprising strength, for lack of a better weapon plucked a block of stone from the broken coping and hurled it at Sir Brian.

It struck him full on the breastplate, and he staggered.

With a growl of savage exultation the maniac clutched the Norman knight by the middle and sprang with him on to the parapet.

For a brief instant he poised himself on the dizzy summit; then, with an unearthly cry, he leaped with his burden down to certain death.

* * * * *

When Robin Hood had recalled the last of his forces from Sedgmere Castle, leaving it to pillage and the flames, he marched back to the encampment.

Weary as everyone was after their night's hard fighting, there was, nevertheless, a scene of great rejoicing, which centred round the fair Hilda. The girl sat enthroned under a spreading tree, and at her side was Maid Marian, who had arrived only that morning with further reinforcements.

Friar Tuck was assiduous in his attention to the two ladies, bustling up and down with dainty luxuries and mellow wines, of which he had taken the precaution to annex a goodly store from the castle larder and cellars.

Wilfrid, as happy as a king at having his sister with him once more safe and sound, sat laughing and chatting with Will Scarlet and Sir Denis de Mervaulx, who spread himself at his ease on the velvet sward; while Little John, none the worse for his dive, lounged at the fireside, a pasty between his knees and a flagon of wine at his side, eating as though he had not seen food for a month.

The only one missing from the happy throng was Friar Anthony, who, since

the victors had marched from the doomed castle, had not been seen.

Right yeomen service had he done in all that grim night's work, shriving a dying man here, protecting and comforting the wounded there, helping the decrepit and the demented among the prisoners out to the pure air and the blue sky of morning, and piloting them to safety.

"A man after my own heart! A merry fellow over the platter, a moderate man at the flagon, with an eye to melt at wee and wink at sins that are not mortal," murmured Friar Tuck to himself, summing up his brother of the cloth, whose part in the stirring events of that night had been such a noble one. "Ah me! a better

man than I, who cracked pates when I should have been mending souls! Yea, verily, I am a disgrace to the Church—a sorry, sorry disgrace!"

But Robin Hood did not mean to let the good man go unthanked; and as soon as all were refreshed, he, with Hilda and Marian, Wilfrid and Sir Denis, set out to the little hermitage.

Entering the glade, on which the sun was shining now in brilliant splendour, they saw the figure of the little friar kneeling in prayer before the shrine at his cell door.

The men instantly doffed their caps, and treading softly to his side, the five sank down upon their knees and joined to his their heartfelt thanks to the King of Hosts.

THE END.

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